



Great Books: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

This discussion guide introduces students to four of the greatest novels ever written: *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *1984* by George Orwell. These classics are windows into different worlds: Renaissance Spain, rural England, Jazz Age America, and totalitarian Europe.

Peer beyond the disparate settings, however, and common themes emerge. Each tale recounts how characters move amid—or beyond—the limits of their landscape. Both *Don Quixote* and *Jay Gatsby* reinvent themselves to escape (*Quixote*) or embrace (*Gatsby*) his era. Both Elizabeth Bennet (*Austen's* comic heroine) and Winston Smith (*Orwell's* tragic antihero) muster nerve and cunning to navigate myriad constraints and pursue love.

Use these video segments and activities in your classroom to whet students' appetites for great literature.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the segment "Introducing *Don Quixote de la Mancha*" from the *Great Books: Don Quixote* video.
 - **Language Arts:** The narrator uses the phrase "tilting at windmills." Ask if anyone has heard it before. Can anyone define it? If not, replay the segment and remind students to heed visual and verbal clues to the phrase's meaning. Then challenge the class to use those clues to define the phrase "attacking mistaken or imaginary enemies."
 - **Visual clue:** A knight holding a lance rides toward a windmill.
 - **Verbal clue:** Carlos Fuentes says *Quixote* "is capable of seeing a giant where there is only a windmill."
 - **Vocabulary:** Write "quixotic" on the board. Have students brainstorm possible meanings. Then direct someone to find and read aloud the actual definition (foolishly impractical, dreamy, rashly romantic). How close to the real meaning did your students get?
 - **Discussion:** Dreamers perplex the rest of us. How do we know when a seemingly quixotic notion is truly brilliant (ending slavery, standing on the

moon), absurd, or misguided (invading Russia, launching new Coke)? Is a Quixote-like willingness to appear foolish an inescapable risk, perhaps even a requirement, of daring to have grand ideas? The following writers' insights may help spur discussion:

- **Emily Dickinson:** "Much madness is divinest sense / To a discerning eye."
- **Ursula K. LeGuin:** "My imagination makes me human and makes me a fool; it gives me all the world and exiles me from it."
- **Henry David Thoreau:** "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."
- **Oscar Wilde:** "Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer."

2. Show the segment "A Woman's Only Career: The Bennet Sisters and the Prospect of Marriage" from the *Great Books: Pride and Prejudice* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

- **Language Arts:** "It's clear," says the narrator, "that Jane Austen has her tongue planted firmly in her cheek." That image is one of many phrases that are widely used yet rarely understood. Direct students or groups to look up the origins of the following common expressions. Etymology Dictionary Online (<http://www.etymonline.com>) and Wordorigins.org may be handy starting points.

beyond the pale	dressed to the nines	Murphy's law
bumper crop	goody two-shoes	mind your p's and q's
call a spade a spade	gung ho	peanut gallery
catch-22	happy as a clam	pushing the envelope
cold turkey	kangaroo court	raining cats and dogs
cut to the chase	kit and caboodle	smart aleck

- **Writing:** Assign students to create short stories or plays in which two characters meet, form wrong impressions of each other, yet somehow manage to become friends.
- **Social Studies:** Recruit students to act the parts of 18th-century folk who have mysteriously time traveled to our era. Have them pose questions about the roles of men and women today.

3. Show the segment "From Rags to Riches: The Reinvention of Jay Gatsby" from the *Great Books: The Great Gatsby* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

- **Discussion:** "The air of mystery that is around Gatsby is one of the things that makes the novel quite wonderful," Professor Jackson Bryer says in the



segment. “If you knew more about specifically about him, I think it would ruin it, in a way.” Do students agree? Why or why not?

- **Writing:** Invite students to reflect and write about whether modern Americans can reinvent themselves the same way that Gatsby did.
 - **History:** *The Great Gatsby* is set in 1922. Divide the class into groups and assign each group to create a poster that presents key events from that year in one of the following areas:
 - U.S. politics
 - international affairs
 - sports
 - science and technology
 - the arts
 - daily life
4. Show the segment “Introducing Winston Smith, INGSOC, Oceania, Eurasia, and East Asia” from the *Great Books: 1984* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Vocabulary:** Write “Orwellian” on the board and ask if anyone has heard the term before. If so, talk about how the adjective was used and what it means. If not, shepherd the class through the following clues. They should help students grasp that Orwellian terminology is language used by the powerful to deceive the powerless about what’s really going on.
 - **Clue 1:** Explain that Orwell was passionate about the use and misuse of language, particularly by those in power. In *1984*, he offers many examples of such linguistic abuse.
 - **Clue 2:** The Ministry of Truth, where lead character Winston Smith works, is actually dedicated to falsifying history. Consequently, the agency’s name is truly Orwellian.
 - **Discussion:** “Who controls the past,” Oceania’s leaders believe, “controls the future.” Consequently, the regime devotes vast resources to rewriting history. Is that effort wasted? Does it really matter how people look at the past? Encourage students to share their views—and the reasons for them.
 - **Graphic Organizer:** Direct students to create Venn diagrams that compare Oceania in 1984 with the United States in 2005.
 - **Writing:** Orwell’s famous essay “Politics and the English Language” (available at <http://www.resort.com/~prime8/Orwell/patee.html>) sets out four questions (below) every “scrupulous writer” should ask. Invite students to pick topics about which they feel strongly. Each student should answer the questions in writing, then craft a paragraph about the topic.

Orwell’s Questions for Writers

1. What am I trying to say?

2. What words will express it?
3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards.

National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Culture
- Power, Governance, and Authority
- Global Connections

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Arts and Communication

- Knows a range of arts and communications works from various historical and cultural periods

Language Arts

- Uses context to understand figurative, idiomatic, and technical meanings of terms
- Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing
- Understands similarities and differences within and among literary works

Life Skills

- Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences

